Historical antecedents to the philosophy of Paul Feyerabend

Gonzalo Munévar

Lawrence Technological University, United States

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a b s t r a c t

Paul Feyerabend has been considered a very radical philosopher of science for proposing that we may

advance hypotheses contrary to well-confirmed experimental results, that observations make theoretical

assumptions, that all methodological rules have exceptions, that ordinary citizens may challenge the

judgment of experts, and that human happiness should be a key value for science. As radical as these

theses may sound, they all have historical antecedents. In defending the Copernican view, Galileo

exemplified the first two; Mill, Aristotle and Machiavelli all argued for pluralism; Aristotle gave

commonsense reasons for why ordinary citizens may be able to judge the work of experts; and a

combination of Plato’s and Aristotle’s views can offer strong support for the connection between science

and happiness.

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1. Introduction

Although, Paul Feyerabend’s ideas in philosophy of science are Хотя идеи Фейерабенда рассматриваются как революционные он сампр знавал, что его идеи коренятся в сочинениях Галилея и Милля

considered revolutionary, he would have been the first to recognize

that such ideas had roots in the work of other philosophers who

toiled long before the discipline received a name of its own. Some

historical antecedents of his arguments for pluralism in science are

quite obvious, since Feyerabend himself pointed to Galileo and Mill.

Others are perhaps not so obvious. Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli, I

will argue, contribute arguments that could be brought together to

support some of the crucial views that Feyerabend made famous, or

infamous, depending on one’s point of view. In this paper, I will

discuss how those thinkers had insightful things to say about one or

more of such themes as the need for pluralism (Aristotle, Machiavelli), плюрализм Макиавелли, отношение между практикой науки счстьем в обществе.

the evaluation of science by the citizenry (Aristotle), and the

relationship between the practice of science and the happiness of

the society (Plato, Aristotle).

I will begin by discussing some of the obvious antecedents: the

important ways in which Galileo and Mill support Feyerabend’s

views. This discussion, I trust, will provide some bridges that will

allow me to make more plausible the case I intend to provide in the

bulk of the paper in support of the notion that the work of Plato,

Aristotle, and Machiavelli are valuable historical antecedents to

Feyerabend’s philosophy. Thus I do not mean to suggest that they

directly influenced the development of Feyerabend’s ideas. In some

instances, I will point out, for example, some clear underpinnings in

Aristotle and Machiavelli for Mill’s ideas on pluralism, ideas that did

influence Feyerabend directly. My intent, however, goes beyond the

uncovering of telling similarities of that sort, for I would like to

present some ways in which the work of our ancestors can make

Feyerabend’s arguments stronger. This approach should have been

even more to Feyerabend’s pleasing, given his emphasis on the

worth of looking for wisdom in other cultures and other times.

Moreover, that these themes were seen as crucial long before the

birth of modern science suggests both the value of trying to place

contemporary controversies in a long historical context, as well as

the value of Feyerabend’s concerns for understanding human

experience.

2. Galileo

When Newton spoke of standing on the shoulders of giants

surely he had Galileo in mind, for Newton, the physicist, owed him

an immense debt of gratitude. But for Newton, the consummate

E-mail address: gmunevar@ltu.edu. methodologist, the connection to Galileo, the consummate anti-

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